

Essays by Edward Weiss on How
to Create Your Own Special Music Now

Compose Your Own Music

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To Learn How To Compose Learn How to Improvise

As I sit here writing this listening to Mozart, I can't help but think of musical form. That sometimes but often not discernible quality to music that makes it art. And when I say art, I'm not talking about improvisation or free form. I'm talking about composition.

Most students are baffled as to how a piece of music is constructed. It's as if learning how to compose is something only gifted individuals do. And while the intuitive sense behind creating melody itself can not be taught, the craft can!

Form is to music what flower arranging is to the florist. You see, **it's all about creating a structure.** In flower arranging, the goal is to create something pleasing to the eye. This is accomplished by how the florist places the flowers. He's not going to stack them all to one side. No. He wants to create something that allows the eye to go back and forth. Something that the viewer can take as a complete experience.

Music is much the same way. If we played the same thing over and over we get monotony. If we vary the music too much we get incoherence. The solution? Go back and forth between sections! Now this is easy to grasp intellectually. The difficulty comes when students attempt to create their first composition and end up with something less than satisfactory. And this is because most students haven't learned to trust their intuition.

You see, to be able **to compose, you must have the ability to move forward without criticizing yourself.** This is THE most important skill and one that can be developed through learning how to improvise. I always suggest students learn how to improvise first. Then when the internal critic is gone, they can move forward with their ideas.

It seems strange that improvisation should come before composition but if you want to develop quickly you do really need to free yourself from judging the product and have the ability to move forward. Then, when you learn how to compose by using sections, you won't be as daunted and stuck at every little detail.

How To Create a Theme And Variations for Piano

There are many ways to compose a piece of music. ABA forms, sonata allegro form, and so on. But the humble theme and variations has been around for centuries. While not used nearly as much as it was during the classical period, it still can be used to create artistic and attractive contemporary piano pieces. Let's get started!

First, we need a theme! Eight bars are the perfect size to contain your theme. I work within this framework all the time and it has proven to be a workhorse when it comes to capturing musical ideas. Now, we can either begin with chords or melody. For theme and variations, I like to start with the melody (as do most composers.) This is because it's a lot easier to create variations for a simple melody than it is to create different textures for chord changes.

The melody does not (and should not) be sophisticated for theme and variations. Why? Because we want to change the melody. It's a lot easier to vary a simple theme than it is a complex one, although I'm sure it's been done successfully. Look at Pachelbel's canon as an example. The theme is simple yet beautiful - exactly what we want.

Once the first 8-bars is complete, we harmonize it and we have the complete theme. Now we create variation one. Most theme and variations composed by the "masters" start their initial variations with just a little change and gradually vary the theme to where it may be unrecognizable towards the end.

We don't have to do this here. In fact, I suggest beginners only create 3 variations at the most. Look at it as an arc. You start out with something, let's say something andante or slow.

Now we want to add some contrast to the whole thing so around variations 2 or 3 we speed it up a little. Eventually we close the theme and variations by returning to the original theme. Take a look at the author's lesson #54 for a good example of how to do this.

How To Quickly and Easily Block Out Entire Sections of Music

Most of you don't want to go to college and learn theory, harmony, and composition techniques. Not only is it tedious and for the most part -boring, but it's also unnecessary.

That is, if you want to compose atonal music or whatever the latest fad in academia is, go to college. If you want to capture your ideas and quickly put them down on paper, you only need to learn how to think in phrases! This is what most improvisers/composers do anyway.

For example, many of you have heard me speak of using 8-bar phrases as a cornerstone to both improv and composition. Why? Because it's a very easy space to work in! You can very quickly complete 8-bars and have both your theme and the first section of music.

By working this way, you don't have to worry about what the final form of the piece will be. Many composition books suggest you block out the entire structure of the piece first including harmony, climax, etc. This is one way of working with music. It's not the only way.

Especially for beginners, it can be daunting to say the least to have no idea where you're going and what to do next. But, and here's the really good part, by working with 8-bar phrases, you learn how smaller sections are built into larger sections and so on. In other words, you learn how composers think.

Here's how I do it. I start by improvising and see what comes up. If I feel like I'm on to something, I just write out 8-bars on a sheet of paper (any paper will do) notate what key I'm playing in and the time and write out the first 2-bars of the melodic idea.

ext, I'll play through and write out the chord changes. For example, if the piece is in the key of F Major, the first 2-bars may be an F Major chord, the next 2-bars, B flat Major and so on.

By working this way, you can quickly complete an 8-bar section of music and you're ready to add more sections working the same way!

Piano Composition Secret of George Winston Reveals Easy Way To Play Piano

Love him or hate him, George Winston single handedly invented a whole new genre of music - New Age piano. His light ambient sound has reached millions of listeners around the world.

Now, a lot, and I mean a lot of pianists would like to be able to play like George but don't think they can. That is, they don't know how he does what he does. They think he just sits down and music comes up or, they believe that he spent years studying composition and theory in order to create these sometimes elaborate compositions.

But, and here's the interesting thing, when you really listen and break down what he's doing (and most other composers for that matter) it's all about how phrases of music are repeated and then contrasted with new material. That's it! That's all composition is. It's the art of repetition and contrast! Just saying this won't help you understand how it's done though.

For example, in the author's lesson "Winter Scene," we have a repeating ostinato pattern using 2 chords. The pattern is played over and over again while the right hand improvises a melody. And guess what? That's a piece of music! That's right!

Now, if I wanted to show this piece as a composition, I would have to chart it out using a chord chart. This too is a lot easier than it sounds.

For instance, "Winter Scene" is just a 4-bar phrase in 4/4 time. Each chord gets 2 bars and that's it! Sometimes called a "loop" these phrases can be repeated as long as the composer/improviser wishes. Then, if more music is required, we just add in new phrases and keep building up our piece of music.

So what is George Winston's secret? Learn how to use musical phrases to create your own easy compositions

You Can Compose Your Own Music

Whenever someone uses the word composer, inevitably, the names of Beethoven, Bach, and other classical personages come to mind. This can be very intimidating to those who want to record their musical thoughts and ideas down.

In fact, comparing yourself to ANY composer will be detrimental to you. Why? Because you will always have to live up to someone's expectations of what is good music or what is not good music. This comparison trap will lead you nowhere and will result in a drying up of the creative spirit. The solution to this trap is to begin where you are and for most of us that means begin EASY!

I'll never forget the first time I tried to "compose" something. It was for classical guitar. I tried to create something original and it took me 2 hours just to write out 4-bars of melody. Of course, I didn't know what I was doing. There has to be some kind of method that works for you.

Now, the method I use today has been very easy to work with because it gives me the freedom to compose AND improvise at the same time. I "compose" using 8-bar phrases.

To do this all one has to do is write out 8-bars on a sheet of paper. Any paper will do. It doesn't have to be music paper or manuscript. In fact, I just use a spiral bound journal with ruled lines on it.

Whenever I want to memorialize an idea, I draw out 8-bars very quickly. I then improvise and allow myself the freedom to play anything that comes out of me. If I try and think something up, the music will usually wind up sounding forced or contrived - qualities that music is better off not having.

Once the idea (either melodic or textural) appears, I write out the first 2-bars so I remember what it is and use chords to quickly fill in the 8-bar section. After this is completed, I may draw another 8-bars and see what else comes. If nothing more is coming at this particular point, I put the journal away and come back to it later on.

This method has served me well over the years and is an excellent starting method for beginning composers

Compose Music The Easy Way!

There are basically two ways to compose music. One way is by starting from the bottom or the harmonic approach.

A composer/arranger takes a few chords, a phrase to hang them on and arranges the harmony in some kind of pattern. An example of this is the "loop" you often hear in contemporary music. A loop is simply a harmonic background over which a melody (or not) is played.

The second way to compose music is by starting with the melody. Composers may or may not have some idea of the finished idea (I prefer not to) but the melodic idea is fitted into some kind of phrase. The most common phrase used is the 8-bar phrase.

I find that starting with the melody to be the easier approach. Why? Because melody is easier to move forward than harmony. Sure, you can block out a few chords and arrange them to create a loop, but this becomes static over time. Melody is much easier to go forward with.

By using the principles of repetition and contrast, we can create a simple ABA form in no time at all. Then we can go back and harmonize each section.

I used to favor the harmonic approach at first. It was very easy to simply jot down chord changes on an 8-bar phrase, create some kind of arrangement, and improvise a melody on top.

There is nothing wrong with this approach at all. But I soon found myself learning towards the melody first. Not because I think it's better, but simply because it's the method I like right now.

Either way, it's a good idea to compose music using one approach or the other. If you try to harmonize a melody while you're creating it, it will slow you down and may stop the creative flow

Composing Music Using Chord Charts

A chord chart is a navigation tool. It's a way for the composer to chart out musical phrases and notate where chord changes occur.

It can be anywhere from 2-bars to 200 bars or more depending on how long the composition is or how many bars it takes to notate a musical idea. For example, in the piece "Egrets," we have an 8-bar phrase with chord changes on top.

This is a chord chart. It tells the performer where the chord changes occur, what the melody is, and when to change chords. This is all that is necessary to create a full arrangement of the music.

We don't need to write out every single note. We use the chord changes to create fresh arrangements of how we want the music to sound.

Notice that the first 2-bars of melody are written out. This was the initial idea. I then drew out 8-bars and finished by putting the chord changes on top. Now, whenever I want to play this little piece, I can play the initial melody and the whole thing comes together.

Of course, I could have written the whole thing out note for note, but this would have taken 30 times as long as just notating where the chords change.

Another benefit of this method is that the music is left elastic and fluid - that is, the aliveness of the music comes to you each and every time you play it. Why? Because each and every note is not written out. You can play it a little differently each time and each time the music will speak a little differently to you

How I Compose A Piece of Music

A number of people have asked about my own methodology for creating a complete piece of music at the piano. At the risk of oversimplification, the steps are as follows:

- 1.** I sit down at the piano without any thought of creating something and tune in to my feelings.
- 2.** I start to play the first thing that comes to mind. In other words, my fingers come before my brain. I let it all hang out and see where the music wants to go. If something resonates or has energy I stay with it until the energy dissipates. If the music does not seem to want to go anywhere I get up and leave.
- 3.** Now, (assuming that I am on to something) I draw bar lines - enough for an 8-measure phrase. I then write down the chord changes on top - hopefully for the entire 8 bars. If the entire 8-bars don't come, I try for four - but I usually succeed in filling up this 8-bar space. I'll then pencil in the melody, but only the first 2-bars.

This way, I let the rest of the melody come of its own accord. The first 2-bars is enough to allow me to improvise the rest until it gels into its final form

- 4.** After the first 8-bar section is complete (or incomplete, it doesn't matter) I'll write down another 8 or 4-bar phrase and listen for the next section of music - if there is a next section. If something comes I follow the same procedure as above.

What I usually try for in this section is contrast. Something different. In this regard, I do usually start out with a preconceived idea of what the final form of the music will be. It will be A-B-A form 90% of the time. Knowing this allows me to use the techniques of composition (repetition and contrast) better.

Although this seems to contradict the idea of letting the music tell you where it wants to go (improvisation) it is useful in composition to give shape to the music. I explain this in more detail in my online class.

- 5.** Now, I have the rudimentary parts of the entire piece. If I only have the A section and the B section does not want to come, I leave it and come back

to it. Sometimes it never comes and that's all right too. I can then combine different sections to different pieces of music and all works out. I give it a title (nature titles for me since that is my inspiration).

6. The piece is finished only after I play it a number of times and it has a chance to gel. I can't think of a better word for this process. After you play what you have written down a number of times, the music settles into what it will finally become. You just know when the piece is finished. It is an intuitive thing.

Sometimes I'll repeat sections a number of times because the inspiration is fresh and because it feels right. Other pieces are very short because more repetition of a section just does not work

How To Compose Using 8-Bar Phrases

Some people think composing is this miraculous thing that only genius's do. What a myth! It's a skill that can be learned. What can't be learned is the intuition that guides the creative force. What can be learned is the technique. And the most important part of composing technique has to do with THINKING IN PHRASES.

A musical phrase can be 2-bars long. It can be from 4 to 8-bars long as well. It is a unit of music that composers use, along with repetition and contrast to create ENTIRE SECTIONS OF MUSIC. There is no secret here people. It's like building up a structure. That's why music is often referred to as frozen architecture. It is built up. The building up creates FORM. A structure such as ABA form can be composed of the A section (8-measures) B section (4 or more measures) then back to the A section.

Now you may be thinking, it looks logical but how does it transfer into actual music? Ah, this is where you get your feet wet and actually try composing a piece. We start from simple means and learn the principles of repetition and contrast first. We start with an 8-bar phrase for the A section. Now a problem arises. How do I fill up this section? You can either start with the melody or with the chords. If you've had a chance to look at my free lesson, you'll see that by improvising, MATERIAL IS INSTANTLY CREATED! This solves your problem doesn't it?

Now, you may be thinking, how do I get this material into the 8-bar framework you've been talking about? First, you need to be able to count in 3/4 or 4/4 time. Not very difficult but if you can't do this now, there are many sites on the web that can teach you this.

Now it's just a matter of transferring this raw improvisational material into the 8-bars. Most likely, you will be jotting down your chord changes. I explain this in a lot more detail in my online class. It's a quick sketch method. You have the raw uncensored germ coming from your improvisations - you then write down what chords you are playing and perhaps the first 2-bars of melody so you remember what the initial impulse was. **The reason I use the 8-bar phrase is that it is a nice unit of time to work with.** I don't try and reinvent the wheel here. It's been used for centuries and can be used in New Age music as well. Once you have this 8-bar phrase you can repeat it and add in another section (B) to add contrast. This may be hard to understand by just reading about it. You have to do it in order to really understand

How To Compose Using ABA Form

ABA form is like a musical sandwich. You have the 2 slices of bread with the contrasting meat and cheese on the inside. Instead of bread and meat, you use musical materials. Perhaps an 8-bar phrase for the A section followed by a 4 or 8-bar phrase for the B section. A nice little musical sandwich.

A piece of music made from ABA form can last anywhere from 45 seconds to 5-6 minutes or longer **DEPENDING ON HOW THE COMPOSER UTILIZES THE TOOLS OF REPETITION AND CONTRAST!**

For example, I can take an 8-bar phrase, repeat that twice, play another 8 bars for the B section, then back to the A section again for another repeat (with variations of course). Now, how long will that last? It depends on tempo or how fast the piece moves through time. Most small ABA sections don't last longer than 2-3 minutes. Why? Because if they were repeated for longer periods of time, the music would become dull and repetitious.

BUT, if we create another section of music - the C section, it provides the relief the ear is searching for and we can then repeat the entire thing again so the form would look like this: ABACABA. This form extends ABA and provides the necessary contrast to create longer pieces.